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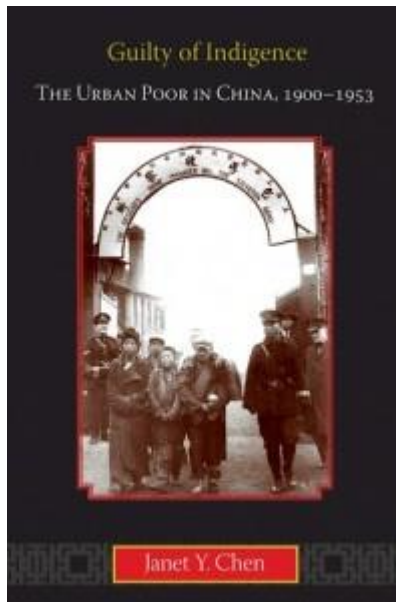
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[A Q&A with Janet Chen, Author of *Guilty of Indigence*](#)

January 31, 2012 in [Books](#), [Interview](#) by [jwasserstrom](#)

By Jeff Wasserstrom



Every society sees and treats its poorest members differently. The distinctive way that Victorian Britain dealt with poverty is a central theme in many novels by Charles Dickens, the prolific author whose books are getting even more attention as the bicentennial of his birth is being marked. For those more interested in India's present than England's past, the book of the moment on this theme seems to be Katherine Boo's [Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity](#), which is earning enthusiastic advance reviews and is due out soon (coincidentally or not on February 7, Dickens' birthday). For China specialists, the most important new publication on the impoverished is one that neither goes as far back as the days of Dickens nor deals with our own time, but is rather [Guilty of Indigence: The Urban Poor in China, 1900-1953](#). It's a very impressive first book by historian Janet Y. Chen, a member of Princeton's History Department. A blurb by China Beat co-founder Ken Pomeranz describes it as a "surprising and creative work" that is "social history of the highest caliber," and political scientist David Strand and I also have very good things to say about the book on its back cover. Rather than present my own assessment of the book, though, I'll let you hear about some aspects of it from the author herself. I recently sent Janet a set of questions by email, which she was good enough to answer as follows:

JW: One thing that sets your book apart from a lot of first monographs on the Republican era (1912-1949), from Gail Hershatter's [The Workers of Tianjin, 1900-1949](#) (1986) to Peter Carroll's [Between Heaven and Modernity: Reconstructing Suzhou, 1895-1937](#) (2006), is that you deal with two cities rather than just one. Did you know from the start that Shanghai and Beijing comparisons would be part of your project?

JYC: At the outset I considered six different cities. My goal was to write about the experiences of the poor, and I worried that there would not be enough materials. So the initial plan was to do a kaleidoscope, piecing together what I thought would be patchy sources. But against all expectations, I found more archival materials than I knew what to do with. I could have chosen one city, but I had found such amazing sources that I did not want to give any of them up. The single-city focus is the model for urban studies on the Republican era, and the inevitable question is always whether city x was typical or not. By using two cases, I foreground that question, and I use the comparisons to highlight the specific local conditions that shaped experiences of destitution. Crafting a narrative based on two cities was challenging, but ultimately I think my research was much more interesting for it.

JW: In a similar vein, though there are other works I can think of that move from the Republican era into the Mao years (1949-1976), such as Susan Glosser's [*Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915-1953*](#) (2003), stopping your story in 1945 (with the end of the war) or 1949 (with the establishment of the PRC) would have been options. Did you consider those, or were you set upon crossing the 1949 divide and dealing with the early 1950s from the beginning?

JYC: The first iteration of the book, in its dissertation form, stopped in 1949. Just about everyone I knew urged me to “do something” about the post-1949 era, and when I finally did, I was very surprised at the continuities that I found. Despite radically different ideological underpinnings, and despite rhetorically emphasizing the National regime's failure to provide for the welfare of the people, the new socialist state in 1949 embraced many of the assumptions and institutions that its predecessor left behind. The biggest surprise in my research was a moment when I figured out a poorhouse established in the final years of the Qing dynasty in Beijing was still in use in 1950, as a Communist detention center for vagrants.

JW: What was the biggest challenge in terms of archives and materials that you had to deal with in researching this study?

JYC: In retrospect, I was very lucky in terms of timing. I was at the #1 Archive in Beijing and the #2 Archive in Nanjing in 2001 and 2002, and at the time both places were very open and welcoming. That has changed dramatically, and if I were to attempt the same project today I probably would not get very far. At the local archives in Beijing and Shanghai, which the research draws most heavily from, the challenge was literally too much material. I cast my net very widely (since my initial worry was about not finding enough sources). It became a sprawling and at times out of control process—but it also led me to some unexpected places.

JW: Some readers of this interview are likely to be more interested in China's present dilemmas than in its past, so what would you say makes your book relevant for them?

JYC: It is completely unfashionable to use the words “poverty” and “China” in the same sentence today. But the rising tide of prosperity in Chinese society has produced new forms of homelessness and impoverishment, and questions about government responsibility and public concern and indifference are surfacing as vital issues. I hope this book will provide a historical lens for understanding present-day contestations over the meanings of poverty and welfare in Chinese society.

JW: Finally, just as courses in a meal are sometimes paired with specific wines, can you name a specific book or article on a different period or a different subject that would go well with Guilty of Indigence—or if want to belabor the culinary metaphor, maybe a reading per section like a wine per course?

JYC: I learned a lot from Joanna Handlin Smith's [*The Art of Doing Good: Charity in Late Ming China*](#). For the PRC, Dorothy Solinger writes powerfully about issues of social citizenship ([*Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logical of the Market*](#)). For a different part of the world, Brodwyn Fischer's [*A Poverty of Rights: Citizenship and Inequality in Twentieth-Century Rio de Janeiro*](#).